Neutralizing Homelessness

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> They have always been with us. The same beggar who stretched a suppliant palm toward the passing togas of ancient Rome can be found today on Colfax Avenue in Denver, still thirsty for wine; the bruised and broken woman who slept in the gutters of medieval Paris now beds down in a cardboard box in a vest-pocket park in New York City.[1]

THIS NEWSWEEK QUOTATION IS profoundly wrong, if simplistically right. Simplistically, past history has indeed consisted of class societies, in which some have always been exploited by others and the needs of those at the bottom have never been fully met. But it is profoundly wrong to equate the situation today with that of past years. Such comparisons conceal the specific nature and causes of—and necessary remedies for—homelessness today. However, the historical inaccuracy in the above quotation is no accident. Rather, it represents a conscious ideological effort by the dominant culture to neutralize the political implications of homelessness, the shock of homelessness.

Homelessness *is* shocking. It is immediately shocking to the homeless, but ultimately to the system that produces homelessness. Homelessness is shocking to those who are not homeless because it exposes misery in the midst of plenty, and represents alienation from home in a home-based society. Such contradictions draw attention to problems which are not accidental or temporary, but inherent and structural—problems which are transparently insoluble by a private market approach. The shocking implications of the growing numbers of the homeless could cause people who are largely apolitical, perhaps well off, and who intuitively support the status quo, to question the efficacy

of the American system. In effect, homelessness may produce, or feed, a crisis of legitimation.

Ignoring the problem, or concealing it, would be the easy way out. Indeed, the George Wills of this world would simply sweep it away:

> If it is illegal...to litter the streets, frankly it ought to be illegal for people...to sleep in the streets. Therefore, there is a simple matter of public order and hygiene in getting these people somewhere else. Not arrest them, but move them off somewhere where they are simply out of sight...."[2]

But homelessness cannot be "moved off somewhere;" it is all around us. It must be dealt with explicitly, neutralized. But to move towards a permanent solution to the problem would require addressing its root causes, and thus would necessitate a virtual revolution in public policy. It would require the acknowledgment of the failure of the market to solve the housing problem, the provision of housing for all those in need, the care of those who are outside the system. Yet such a "revolutionary" solution challenges the fundamental economic, social and political fabric of US society. Thus, homelessness poses US policymakers with a critical dilemma: they cannot actually "solve" the problem of homelessness in the US, and yet they cannot ignore or conceal it either. They must find a different approach.

The government's response to this dilemma is defensive in the extreme. Intellectually, it denies the extent of the problem, blames the victim, specializes the cause, and hides the consequences of homelessness. The policy response isolates the homeless from the majority, creating programs and legislation to address homelessness specifically, rather than problems inherent in the housing or social support services generally. As a result, the homeless are warehoused in shelters rather than provided normal housing, and are isolated as much as possible from contact with the mainstream of daily life and human contact.

To understand this pattern, we must first understand why homelessness is different today, what its current causes are, and why the prevailing powers deal with it as they do. We can then examine the two prevailing and seemingly contradictory US approaches to homelessness: on the one hand, highlighting its ex-

istence through countless media features and passing superficial and ineffectual legislation in order to appear to address the problem, and on the other, isolating it and concealing its root causes, thus neutralizing the crisis of legitimation it could foster.

The Historical Character of Today's Homelessness

HOMELESSNESS IS HISTORICALLY CONSTITUTED. The simplest definition of homelessness is "not having shelter for the night." But that definition[3] is hardly exhaustive: it leaves open what shelter is—a roof over one's head? protection from the elements? temporary shelter? And there are social attributes of housing involved—is a person in a public emergency shelter not homeless? Or one in a hospital, about to be discharged with no place to go? Or a family living three to a room? These questions can only be answered historically, not absolutely.

The major historical patterns of homelessness might be separated out as follows:

A non-industrial pattern, in which the resources to provide all persons with minimally adequate housing are missing. The extent of homelessness is determined by the combination of absolute shortage and maldistribution of resources.

A pattern during early industrialization, in which the growing demand for workers in factories led to migration to cities in excess of the housing supply available for the migrants (or at prices not affordable with the wages being paid, which is the same thing). In this incarnation, homelessness is "rolling," rather than constant for any particular individuals; people migrate to the city and become temporarily homeless until more housing is built or they find lodgings. London and Paris at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century are examples of this pattern.

A pattern under colonial exploitation, in which the impact of subordination in an international economic and political system, combined with a distorted form of "early" industrialization, produce a skewing of population and of resources that, superimposed upon resource scarcity, creates the phenomena we now see in many of the third world's giant cities. This pattern of homelessness is permanent and endemic, and in most cases escalating.

The pattern of mature industrialization within a private market economy, in which there is an unstable balance between the num-

ber of low paid workers and unemployed, and the number of housing units available to them. The extent of homelessness here will be cyclical, in general paralleling fluctuations in the levels of employment and wages in the private economy.

The new pattern of deindustrialization prevailing in many contemporary industrialized private market economies such as the US,[4] involving declines in manufacturing jobs, increases in the services sector, a heightened international division of labor, a "return to the city," all with the consequences for homelessness discussed below.

It is this last pattern of homelessness which characterizes the current phase of homelessness in the United States and differentiates it from other historical patterns of homelessness. Both the number of the homeless and the nature of homelessness changed significantly in the United States in the last twenty years. The magnitude of homelessness has changed drastically. The number of homeless in New York City, for example, has tripled between 1982 and 1986, and increased by 42 percent in the last two years. Kim Hopper and Jill Hamberg, in their pioneering study of the history of homelessness, [5] speak of the crossing of an "invisible threshold"—the beginning of the new and rapid escalation of homelessness which most observers situate at about 1979.* While the major economic transformations the term "deindustrialization" somewhat imprecisely describe were already well in place before then, general economic growth and political resistance had prevented the manifestation terms of numbers of homeless until this point.

Today's homelessness differs qualitatively from that of all earlier periods in several ways. First,it is not the result of general poverty. Rather, it is occurring in one of the most advanced industrial economies of the world, in the midst of unprecedented wealth. Second, today's homelessness is a long-term, not a temporary or transitional phenomenon. Homelessness is increasing in a period of relative economic prosperity. While there was a recession in the early 1980s, there was no catastrophic decline

*This is roughly the point at which: the increase in homeless families began to outpace the increase in homeless individuals; the reasons for homelessness given by families seeking shelter changed from individual emergencies to broader housing or economic changes; the "urban fiscal crisis" effectively ended (New York City balanced its budget in 1981); population in many cities began growing again, after a secular decline; gentrification became a major phenomenon.

in employment or wages, and after it ended in 1984, homelessness did not decrease.

The homeless population has also changed significantly.The proportion of blacks and Hispanics among the homeless has escalated dramatically. Where minority group members were a minority of the homeless ten years ago, they are now a large majority in many cities. In addition, homelessness is increasingly a phenomenon of the young and of families. The earlier impressions of those living on the streets or in flop-houses as primarily middle-aged or elderly male "hoboes" no longer holds true for those without homes today. The US Conference of Mayors estimates that 28 percent of today's homeless are families. Finally, the number of mentally ill on the streets has escalated. While figures for the prevalence of mental illness generally have not changed significantly in recent years, the accommodations available to them have precipitously declined.

The Causes of Homelessness

HOMELESSNESS HAS THREE related causes: the profit structure of housing, the distribution of income, and government policy. Briefly, housing is supplied for profit, as a commodity. There is no profit in supplying housing for those now homeless. The cost of provision has increased, and alternate uses are more profitable. Changes in the economy have deprived many people of the income with which to pay for housing. The government only acts to provide housing for persons unable to pay the market price when the economy may need such people in the future or when those people threaten the status quo. Neither situation prevails today.

The new situation that explains the current rise in homelessness is, on the economic side, deindustrialization. Politically, it can be attributed to the new conservatism. On the housing end, its reflection might well be labeled "the abandonment/gentrification pattern." On which of these three causes of homelessness one focuses—the housing system, the economic system, or the political system—depends on the immediate area in which a solution is being sought. Theoretically, there are three answers to the problem of homelessness, corresponding to its three causes: un-

couple the housing system from the rest of the private market system and make it respond to need; change the economic system so that all have a decent living wage; or provide government subsidies to provide housing for those who cannot get it through the private market. The three causes and the three cures are intimately related to each other, with the economic arguably lying at the root of the other two. Given present relationships, all three need to be addressed.

Abandonment and Gentrification

THE MOST DIRECT CAUSE of homelessness is very simple: no housing—for some. The resources to build sufficient housing in the US exist, but the nature of the private market housing system creates a "shortage" of housing.The formula is simple: when housing is only provided for profit, those who cannot provide others with profit get no housing.[6]

Long term expectations temper short-term housing market responses. During the Great Depression, real incomes plummeted, but were expected to rise again. Apartments and homes were vacated because their former residents could no longer afford the payments necessary to render their owners (or financiers) a profit, yet they were not abandoned. Owners held on to them, even though they might be empty, in the expectation that one day they would again produce a profit. That situation no longer holds today. If housing is only suitable for low-income households today, it is likely to be abandoned tomorrow. This was the pattern in many cities in the 1970s.

For other housing occupied by low-income households, however, there are alternate uses. Gentrification is a convenient term for this aspect of far-reaching changes in city structure, [7] of which abandonment is only one aspect. Gentrification involves the displacement of lower income groups by those of higher income in older housing, generally near city centers. The chain of causation begins with the economic: deindustrialization. The decline of manufacturing, the rise of the service sector, the replacement of blue-collar by white-collar jobs, higher technology, centralized corporate control, and increasing proportions of professional, technical, and administrative jobs, lead to increas-

ing demands for high quality housing adjacent to the central business districts of major cities. The areas now in demand formerly housed low-paid workers who needed to live close to industrial jobs at the center of town. As those jobs disappeared or moved out, areas immediately surrounding the central business district turned into slums which housed most of those who today constitute the homeless.[8] Gentrification includes the conversion of these "slum" areas to "higher and better uses." This translates to mean the displacement by the better off of poor people, often onto the streets.[9] The decline in the number of Single-Room Occupancy units in New York City, which traditionally housed the poorest of the city's population, from an estimated at 127,000 in 1975 to 14,000 in 1983, is just one example of the process.[10]

The spatial restructuring, of which gentrification is a part, is not inconsistent with abandonment; it is rather the opposite side of the same coin. Gentrification increases land values and demand in certain areas of the city, generally those immediately adjacent to downtown or with particular environmental amenities, such as riverfronts and parks. Demand inevitably declines elsewhere, causing prices to fall, maintenance to be reduced, living conditions to deteriorate, and, at the extreme, whole buildings to be abandoned.

Government policies follow and accentuate this process of differentiation. They support gentrification with tax abatements, low cost loans, and infrastructure improvements. They withdraw services and facilities from declining areas—the intellectual rationalization is "triage," an approach to which the fiscal crisis gave legitimacy—and merge government abandonment with private abandonment. Housing opportunities for the poor are lost at both ends. Those pushed out at the bottom become homeless.

Deindustrialization

THE STRUCTURE OF PRODUCTION is ultimately at the root both of what happens in the housing market and government policy. The influence is not always direct, it may in some cases not be decisive, but it is always present. The logic is straightforward: what the homeless get depends on what the poor get; what the poor get depends on how useful they are to the system, and

how they deal with their position in it. When there is a shortage of labor, the poor are needed. Their housing is of concern, and very few end up homeless, as was the situation during World War II, and during the post-War boom. When the poor are militant and the establishment is concerned about their possible actions, the homeless cannot be rejected or isolated. Even if they are not well housed, the government will make efforts to at least acknowledge housing of the poor as a public responsibility, as was the case in the Great Depression. But when there is a surplus of labor and the poor seem quiescent, the poor are not served, and the homeless bear the brunt. So it is today.

The determining factor is not simply the unemployment rate. Unemployment and homelessness are certainly related: the more people without jobs, the more without homes. The history of successive periods of recession and fuller employment show a broad correlation.[11] But, as in the case of the Depression, periods of high unemployment were expected to be followed by periods of low unemployment.

Today, there are fewer unemployed than there were in the mid-1970s, and the steady, significant rise in homelessness over the last 10 years is not paralleled by any similar steady rise in unemployment or the welfare rolls. No single indicator can adequately explain the startling rise in homelessness that we see today. Both the extent and the nature of employment and unemployment have changed, and so have the power relationships of employers and employees.

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION IS ONE PART of these economic changes. The process is not a simple technological one involving a decline of manufacturing and rise of a service sector. There is nothing inherent in the service sector that dictates that its wages must be lower than those of the manufacturing sector. The fact that 44 percent of all new jobs created since 1980 pay poverty-level wages has as much to do with the relationship between employers and workers as with the type of work involved. The type of work may facilitate an aggrandizement of power by an employer,and may weaken the ability of a worker to insist on a decent wage, but it is ultimately conflict between the two that will decide how much is paid. The figures on the distribution of wealth show where things now stand: by 1983 the top 0.5 per-

cent of US households owned 45 percent of all wealth (excluding personal residences), up 38 percent from twenty years earlier. And the gap between what they earn and what the poor earn is the greatest in history. [12]

Marginalization of greater numbers of workers, and the accompanying loss of housing by the poorest among them is the ultimate result of conflicts among people, groups, classes, not of an undirected and uncontrolled march of technology, or of markets, or of organizational forms. And it is certainly not the result of some inexplicable change in "consumer preferences," as many of the popular accounts of the "revitalization of the city" would have us believe.[13]

The surplus army of the unemployed is today more surplus than ever. Major segments of it are no longer relevant to the dominant processes of production. Larger and larger numbers of blacks, Hispanics, women, teenagers, the elderly, and the disabled are no longer necessary to the labor force. Maintaining their children is no longer necessary for the reproduction of the labor force, because they will never be "in" it. The homeless are the surplus of the surplus, the outer margin of the marginal.

Racism plays a substantial role in permitting such treatment of those forced to the economic margin. Were whites increasingly found sleeping on the streets, the questions raised would be sharper, the identification with the victims by the white middle class greater, the moral outrage more widespread, and the demands for action more immediate. But seeing black persons homeless fits in easily with white stereotyping, which makes blaming the victim easier. Thus, racism not only marginalizes minority group members disproportionately in the economic and housing systems, it also makes it more likely that, once homeless, they will stay that way.

The New Conservatism

GOVERNMENTAL ACTION both causes homelessness and fails to remedy it. It decreases the available supply of housing, reduces the ability of the poor to afford what housing there is, and fails to provide additional housing or even maintain existing housing.

Governmental actions reflect the existing relationships of political power. While workers and the poor generally have had limited power, there has been a significant reduction in their immediate influence in the US since 1968-1975, a reduction that correlates with changes in policies affecting homelessness.

The civil rights movement, the urban riots, the rise of the New Left and the anti-Vietnam war movement, all achieved some concessions in the late 1960s. By the beginning of the 1970s, however, these movements had made little permanent change in the relationships of power. Concessions made under pressure by the Nixon administration and the business community were gradually withdrawn. The fiscal crisis of 1975 in New York provided the ideological cover for a renewed offensive by the established conservative business and political leadership. The net results are the policies of the Reagan (and, in New York, Koch) era. For the homeless; the results have been devastating.

The contribution of government policy to increasing homelessness is amply documented.[14] The disappearance of the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units from the housing stock in cities like New York is an example. Up to a quarter of the homeless interviewed in New York City shelters gave SROs as their last residence in 1986,[15] yet 87 percent of the city's SRO stock was demolished or converted between 1970 and 1982, and much of that conversion was made attractive to investors by the availability of city tax abatements under Section J-51 of its laws.[16]

Governmental action also directly undercuts the ability of the poor to afford housing. The cuts in basic income maintenance have been devastating. Between 1981 and 1986, 442,000 people were cut from the national welfare caseload—a "savings" of $3.6 billion dollars.[17] For those remaining on welfare, the real value of benefits in the median state dropped 37 percent since 1970. In January, 1985, in the median state the AFDC benefits were 41 percent of the poverty line.[18] The Reagan administration denied eligibility to 491,300 recipients of disability benefits.[19] Food stamps have been cut $6.8 billion since 1982, with one million people losing benefits and 20 million receiving reduced benefits.[20] The average food stamp benefit is now 49 cents per

meal. The real value of the legally established minimum wage was $2.30 an hour in 1977; today, it is $1.88.[21]

On the prevention side, the picture is even simpler: the Reagan administration has simply halted all programs for the production of additional low-rent housing, and has had to be forced to give even the very minimum of support for any type of program to combat homelessness.[22]

Publicizing Homelessness

ALL OF THE PRECEDING REASONS suggest why the homeless are neglected today, even more than formerly. Perhaps what needs to be explained, then, is not why so little is done about homelessness, but why so much is said about it. There have been specials on public television, special issues of the *Village Voice*,[23] a three-part series in the *New York Times*;[24] the *Times* now carries an article on homeless on the first page of its Metropolitan Section at least twice a week. The trend has penetrated the magazines as well: the Readers Guide to Periodical Literature contains no listings for "homelessness" in 1975 or 1980, but three in 1981, 15 in 1982, 21 in 1983, and 32 in1984.[25]

The Reagan administration and the neoconservatives, as might be expected, ignore homelessness unless forced to address it. But the liberal opposition, hardly inclined otherwise to fight on issues involving expenditures for social programs, is willing to speak out on homelessness. Politicians with national ambitions see advantages in passing state funding for programs for the homeless. Religious leaders, otherwise quiet or even conservative on social issues, call for church efforts to address homelessness. Hunger strikes have succeeded in obtaining program changes favoring the homeless. Local leaders everywhere acknowledge the need for remedial action. As Mayor Koch said, "Whenever I pick up a newspaper, or listen to the news, I find stories about one of our most pressing problems—that of the homeless."[26]

Intractable social problems, particularly ones those which the establishment is bent on avoiding, are not usually given such prominent play. Why is homelessness treated differently than,

say, long-term unemployment, or residential segregation, or declining real incomes?

Homelessness receives national attention for three reasons: the protests of the homeless themselves, their allies and advocates; the existence of a long-term charitable tradition to which homelessness directly appeals; and, above all, the need to deflect the dangers that deeper recognition of homelessness and its causes could produce, a deflection which is aided by superficial publicity.

The Emerging Homeless Movement

THE HOMELESS THEMSELVES are in a weak position to assert such rights as they may have. The homeless are not, in any normal sense, a threatening constituency. Since one cannot vote without a permanent address, they will no unseat any elected official by their votes. They will not bring any business to a stop by withdrawing their services. So disenfranchised are the homeless that they cannot even disrupt any administrative machinery within government.

This does not mean the the homeless and their advocates are completely without weapons. The successes of the Community for Creative Non-Violence in Washington, DC, led by Mitch Snyder, an advocate for the homeless with experience in public relations, demonstrate what can be done. The most recent action by the Committee won participants the right to participate in a hearing of the Senate Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs. The group erected a statue of a homeless family on the steps of the Capitol and refused to take it down, despite Capitol regulations, until the Speaker of the House invited participants to the hearing. The House Budget Committee simultaneously agreed to look at the problem, and were impressed by the work going on at the shelter which Snyder and his co-workers operated.[27]

In addition to the Committee, a National Union for the Homeless is forming. The first Union of the Homeless was established in the Philadelphia-Delaware Valley in the fall of 1983, under the leadership of Chris Sprowal, formerly homeless himself. Despite mammoth difficulties of organizing the homeless, similar

unions have been established in Chicago, Gary, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, Berkeley, and New York.[28]

Although the homeless and their supporters have staged some militant mass actions, such as sit-ins in the Mayor's office in Philadelphia and tying up traffic in the Los Angeles business district for two hours, the homeless by themselves are likely to play a more symbolic than decisive role in the broader political context. They form an essential part of any effort to achieve large-scale solutions to the problem of homelessness, but they cannot by themselves explain the range of attention homelessness has received in the public arena.[29]

Advocates for the homeless have also agitated successfully for support from the housing and the social work/philanthropic movements. Support within the housing movement has been consistent, with many stressing that homelessness is, after all, lack of housing, and thus the quintessential housing issue.[30] But movements around housing issues historically have had a rocky road to travel, and their duration and impact has often been proportional to the extent to which they have broadened out to other issues, found more community-based sources of strength, or been part of movements with a more explicitly political orientation. The tenants' movement is probably the strongest and longest lasting of contemporary movements around housing issues. Cooperative and self-help tenants' groups have often shown tremendous resilience and capacity for growth. Tenants' leaders, often women, have emerged out of housing struggles and made major contributions on housing and other issues.[31]

The tenant movement, however, has never approached the strength, influence, or permanence of the labor movement.[32] Individual self-interest in housing, narrowly seen, is a weak base for long-term organizing. Perhaps too much is at stake to ask a household, having achieved a minimum level of security for itself, to take chances with that security in the interests of others. Perhaps the whole constitution of residential life in the US today is founded on an individualism that makes collective action unlikely. Perhaps the individual route to improved shelter has functioned well enough in the past for it still to be perceived as the preferred route in the future. In any event, sustained militancy

has always been a major challenge to the housing movement. In periods lacking wide-spread political ferment, such as ours today, high levels of militancy in any one sector, such as housing, are even more difficult to achieve. The housing movement has tried to focus public attention on homelessness, but has not produced the attentionthe issue has received in recent years.

The advocates for the homeless have been more effective, thus far, than the neighborhood housing movement or the homeless themselves in the campaign for government action. Through law suits, lobbying and public testimony, studies and research, documentation, newspaper, radio and television coverage, their efforts have succeeded in giving homelessness a prominence beyond that of any other housing issue of recent times.[33] Why have these efforts elicited response in so many quarters, despite the relative powerlessness of the homeless and the division of "pro-housing" communities on the issue, and the long-term neglect that permitted homelessness in the first place?

The Tradition of Charity

THE ANSWER LIES PARTLY in the set of cultural values revolving around concern for the poor and the unfortunate, a component of almost all religions and systems of ethics. Whatever the social function of such concerns, their individual roots are deep and the actions they precipitate often sincere and concerned. Homelessness appeals to such concerns not only because of its visibility but also because of its apparent simplicity: "obviously what the homeless need is shelter for the night, that's not so hard to provide, let's do it."

Yet the charitable tradition leads to a narrow view of homelessness. For instance, some church groups in New York City held back from linking a bill to prevent conversions of Single Room Occupancy units, a mainstay of housing for the potentially homeless, with broader bills addressing issues of housing for all the poor, because the emphasis of the church groups was a single-mindedly charitable one limited to the particular objects of their concern. Such church groups are an important and frequently effective voice for specific programs, but do not threaten to question the housing system as a whole.

Homelessness receives so much traditional charitable attention also because of the visibility of the homeless as recipients of charity, and the ease with which the "gift relationship" can be established with them: "the giver is benevolent, the receiver is grateful, and the positions of both giver and receiver are confirmed."[34] But homelessness has evoked a response which other issues of charitable concern (hunger, or the battering of women, or child neglect, or unemployment, or widespread deterioration of neighborhoods) have not.

Homelessness and Delegitimation

THE RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS is ultimately, I believe, better explained as an attempt to neutralize the outrage homelessness produces in those who see it than as reasoned desire to cope with a particular practical problem of society. Homelessness in the midst of plenty outrages our sense of well-being and social justice, and our sense of order and discipline. It touches a critical pillar upon which the whole organization of our lives depend: the sense of "home."

Most Americans expect to see homelessness in third world countries, in Calcutta or Lagos or Mexico City or Sao Paulo. But they do not expect to see it in the United States, in the richest country in the world, in the country that holds itself to be at the apex of development. Something is amiss. Homelessness jars the complacency with which we accept the established as good and right.

We tend lead our lives in response to a set of established rewards and penalties, and we expect other people to do likewise. We believe we have a certain understanding of how society works, what motivates individuals in it, why they do what they do. Whether we like it or criticize it, this is a system that we know and understand. We work, even for inadequate wages at unpleasant work, because we must earn the money with which to keep a roof over our heads; there is no alternative. But the homeless have slipped between the cracks of society. And, just as the hippies of the 1960s deeply shocked conventional citizens by their rejection of bourgeois values and goals, the homeless shock the those with a conventional view of the world, if in a

deeper and less self-conscious way. The rewards of society have not proven attractive, or available, to them. But neither have the penalties: jail holds no fear for them, humiliation, cold, and hunger are part of their daily lives. The system has no power over them. They live in a different world from us, whether "mentally ill" or simply adapting to their circumstances in a socially discordant way. As Bahr and Caplow wrote in 1973, the homeless man

> poses a threat because he has moved out of the reward system; he is a man out of control. Being functionally, if not actually, devoid of significant others, property, and substantial responsibility, he is not subject to the usual social constraints.... He may go along with the rules, but there is no guarantee that he will do so, and because he is not part of the system, he has no important stake in its continuity.[35]

Homelessness inspires not only the intellectual realization that the machinery of the system has failed somehow to produce the basic shelter everyone needs, but even more the social realization that the system has come up against some limits it cannot exceed, has created a world it can no longer control. The more the hegemonic system pervades all aspects of life, the more dangerous is such a gap in its effectiveness.

Finally, homelessness has such a deeply shocking effect because it goes beyond "mere" poverty. It strikes at a cornerstone of our whole perception of society, of life, in an advanced capitalist economy. Even beggars, one assumes, go home at night. Their daily struggle for existence ceases in the evening, and they too return to their private sphere, out of our sight and consciousness. But the homeless have adapted to their situation in a way that is disconcertingly lodged between the public and the private. They do not go home at night, or rather, they are "at home" in "non-private" places. They have given up on the American dream, a home of one's own, a refuge from the competitive pressures and tense environment of the work-a-day world. Their lives have become public. The normal demarcation between public and private, between home life and work life, has fallen. The very term "alienation" has its roots in the frightening concept of not being at home where one is, being an "alien."[36] The homeless are alienation incarnate.

Homelessness and the Public Policy Dilemma

THE PRECEDING LOGIC SUGGESTS that the dominant response to homelessness will both require recognition of the problem and the prohibition of effective action to solve it. To ignore the problem altogether invites a potential legitimation crisis and a real solution involves too great a repudiation of free market capitalism. Thus, an ideological and practical dilemma confronts those committed to maintaining the status quo. If government does not deal with homelessness, it appears illegitimate and unjust; if it does try seriously to alleviate homelessness, it breaks the link between work and reward that legitimizes wage labor. Neither horn of the dilemma is a comfortable resting place. The response has been to find a way that neither admits nor denies homelessness, that neither provides homes nor leaves the homeless on the streets.

The conservative* reaction to homelessness thus is aimed at neutralizing its implications. It is aimed more at dealing with ordinary (housed) people's reactions to homelessness than with homelessness itself. The leitmotif is isolation: isolate the problem intellectually, isolate the victim physically. Homelessness is thus treated as a set of individual problems to be dealt with as charity cases or subjects of social work attention, rather than as societal problems created by economic and political relationships. The government does this by denying the problem, blaming the victim, specializing the causes and concealing the consequences.

Denying the Problem: The first response, the dominant one in the federal government today, is to assert that homelessness barely exists. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), housing experts' estimates of two to three million homeless nationwide is an exaggeration. The actual figure, claims HUD, is more like 250,000 or at most 350,000 persons nationwide.[37] On June 16, 1982, Philip Abrams, Deputy Assistant Director for Housing for HUD, had gone so far as to state:

*I use "conservative" as a synonym for "hegemonic" or "dominant" or "systemic." I do not suggest a deliberately thought-out strategy by a conspiratorial group of rulers, nor an anonymous and inescapable process operating independent of human agency. I suggest rather a logic by which these responses, however individually motivated, are favored, for example, by the media, political leaders, businessmen, foundation executives, and the academic elite. Opposing approaches are, through similarly independent actions but in a consistent pattern, ignored or swept aside.

"No one is living on the streets."[38] The homelessness that does exist, administration officials argue, is nothing new. In the words of former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Margaret Heckler, "The homeless have always been with us." Thus, if there is a problem of homelessness, it is nothing new, not very big, and nothing to get excited about. And it certainly requires no major governmental response. Reagan's Secretary for HUD believes "the problems of the homeless rarely relate to lack of available shelter."[39]

Attorney General Edwin Meese suggested, when he was still Presidential Counselor, that the homeless did not have regular shelter because they found living from a suitcase on the street or in public places to be much cheaper. President Reagan no doubt had the same explanation in mind when he said:

> What we have found in this country, and we're more aware of it now, is one problem that we've had, even in the best of times, and this the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice.[40]

Becoming homeless is a way of getting the city to put you up in a shelter or a welfare hotel, Mayor Koch concurs: if you make the standards for sheltering the homeless too high, you will attract people into the streets as a way of getting into the shelters. For those who have ever seen a city shelter or been in a welfare hotel in New York, the comment seems bizarre.

Denying the problem can be expensive. Operating under the assumption that homelessness is temporary and minor, New York City has spent money profligately on temporary accommodations for the homeless. The city spends, on the average, around $20,000 a year to shelter a family in a "welfare hotel." In one

year the city spent $72,000,000 to house 3,300 families in this way.[41] Technically, the rationale for this expenditure is that federal funds are limited to providing "emergency" housing assistance.*

Substantively, the policy reflects the administration's desire to avoid facing the real causes of homelessness, even if it necessitates grossly inefficient and extravagant expenditures. Spending $20,000 a year for temporary shelter reinforces the myth that the need is also only temporary; spending a lesser amount on permanent housing would shatter that myth.

Blaming the Victim: If denying the problem of homelessness fails in the face of everyday observations, administration officials instead focus on blaming the victims of homelessness. There is a homespun version and an academic formulation. The homespun version goes something like this: "The homeless are not like you and me. There's something wrong with them or they wouldn't be homeless. They are incompetent, crazies, drunks, drug addicts, kooks. They are dirty, unpleasant, queer, different. They talk to themselves. They drink or take dope or are crazy. They are social problems; we have other more worthy social problems to worry about."

The academic formulation is more dangerous, but is often wrapped in jargon more ludicrous than harmful:

> Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterized by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures.[42]

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*President Reagan innocence of knowledge of his own Administration's position was illustrated, to the embarrassment of the government, by the president's remarks at a press conference on November 19, 1986: "I just read this morning in the paper about a needy family in New York that is being put up in a hotel, and the cost to welfare just for the rent of the hotel room is $37,000 a year. And I wonder why somebody doesn't build them a house for $37,000." The administration's own policies, of course, precluded precisely that result. On June 15, 1987, a bill was considered in Congress that would have let cities use federal welfare funds to build housing for the homeless. The administration opposed it on the grounds that the funds "were never intended to address the causes of homelessness," and further that it would put the US Department of Health and Human Services "into the housing construction and acquisition business." *New York Times*, June 16, 1987.

Sometimes the shifting of responsibility for homelessness onto the shoulders of the homeless is more subtle, and even benignly motivated. The Human Resources Administration (HRA) in New York City, for instance, proudly announced its first venture into the "prevention of homelessness" in November 1987. Rather than providing shelter *after* a person was already on the streets, HRA intended to intervene before the homelessness occurred. How? It would review the welfare records of households who had a poor history of rent-paying or were otherwise identified as likely to be evicted, and work with them to improve their rent-paying habits, thus making eviction, and subsequent homelessness, less likely. The implicit assumption behind this approach is that the characteristics of the individual determine his/her likelihood of being homeless; if government can intervene to improve character and change behavior, to make the likely future homeless comply better with the rules of the private market, then some homelessness will be "prevented."

Specialism: Akin to blaming the victim is specialism, or calling a general problem the sum of a number of different special problems, defined in this case by the characteristics of the victims.[43] A "special prȯblem," according to this approach, is an aberration of the system, a problem affecting those deviant from its norms. By finding out who is affected, by examining in detail the characteristics of the homeless, we can find the solution to the problem. Thus much research connected with homelessness focuses on ascertaining the precise characteristics of the victims rather than the causes of their victimization. Whether the victim is then blamed or pitied is a matter of taste. The net effect is to separate the problem of homelessness out from the factors that caused it, to make it a special problem of a special group, not a result of more general, systemic, factors. As neoconservative Thomas Main concludes, solutions to homelessness should be in the form of "separate policies for separate sub-populations," rather than a comprehensive attack on problems of housing or unemployment or lack of social services.[44]

Specialism is abetted by much of the media coverage. An analysis of New York City's newspaper coverage of homelessness in four major dailies surveyed over a three month period showed that less than one, three, eight and ten percent, respec-

tively, of stories about homelessness referred to the reasons people became homeless. Instead, the survey's authors conclude, the newspapers portray homelessness as a problem which begins after the person has lost housing.[45] The media slant is effective. When the *New York Times* polled individuals at random asking them what they thought caused homelessness, 20 percent said unwillingness to work, 20 percent said alcohol or drugs, 19 percent bad luck, 12 percent psychological problems. *No one* mentioned housing.[46]

THE MOST FREQUENT and deceptively simple form of this argument is to consider homelessness a consequence of mental illness, and to blame its increase on the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill.[47] Thus, the *Wall Street Journal* editorializes that homelessness "primarily reflects a failure of mental health policy, not housing policy."[48]

Deinstitutionalization, in the partial fashion in which it was undertaken, did in fact contribute to homelessness. Undertaken in the mid-1960s, the hope behind reducing the institutionalization of the mentally ill was to provide, through reintegration into normal communities, a better long-range future for those with mental disabilities. From 1965 to 1980 over 60,000 former mental patients were released from New York State institutions alone.[49] Nationally the figure is estimated at 366,000 between 1955 and 1975.[50] However, the supporting community services necessary to help ex-patients in the transition to normal life were never adequately provided. Of the 2,000 community mental health centers expected to be established after the passage of the Community Mental Health Act in 1963, only 789 had been established in 1983.[51] Many of those deinstitutionalized had nowhere to go but the streets.[52] Interviews with users of the city's shelter system under the auspices of the New York State Psychiatric Institute found that 14 percent had some history of hospitalization for an emotional problem, 14 percent for drinking problems, and another 14 percent for drug problems.[53]

However, deinstitutionalization is misleading as an explanation of homelessness for at least four reasons. First, the majority of homeless individuals have never had any contact with a mental institution, and the two-thirds of the homeless who are families are not on the streets because of discharges from in-

stitutions.[54] Even among the 22 percent of men in emergency shelters who had been institutionalized, almost half had been discharged at least five years before they became homeless.*Second, deinstitutionalization began in the late 1960s, ten years before homelessness first hit the national scene. Third, most of the mentally ill are not homeless. More mentally ill are housed today than are homeless. The eventual number that become homeless depends not on their mental illness, but on their housing and economic situation. Indeed, it was just when the wave of deinstitutionalization ended that the number of homeless housed in shelters began its startling rise in 1977. Fourth, the explanation mixes cause and effect.If the proportion of the mentally ill is greater among the homeless today than among the population at large, that may be an effect, not a cause, of homelessness. Take the findings, reported without a hint of irony, in a recent, widely publicized study:

> On a scale measuring symptoms of depression, nearly half (47 percent) of the Chicago homeless registered levels that would suggest a need for clinical attention (compared to about 20 percent in the national Health and Nutrition Examination).[55]

One might draw the conclusion that, of only 27 percent more of the homeless are depressed than their non-homeless counterparts, the homeless have remarkable mental resilience indeed!

Isolating the Homeless: In addition to specializing the causes of homelessness, policy-makers attempt to hide the consequences of homelessness by physically isolating the homeless themselves. Denial and blaming the victims ultimately become poor excuses. Attributing homelessness to deinstitutionalization and the special characteristics of the homeless population ultimately fails in the face of statistics. Outlawing homelessness, as the Phoenix and Santa Barbara "Anti-Public Sleeping" ordinances attempted to do, provoke moral outrage. Yet some action has to be taken to remove homelessness from the public eye.

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*Estimates of the percentage of the homeless who are mentally ill range from 22 percent in Berkeley, to 84 percent in Philadelphia, 30 percent in New York City, and 30.8 percent in Ohio. For sources see Joel Blau, "The Homeless of New York," Dissertation, Columbia University School of Social Work, 1987, pp. 65-66. See also Blau's useful summary of official New York City studies at p. 209.

THE SHOCK OF HOMELESSNESS would not be so great if the homeless were only in ghettos or slum areas remote from downtown. But homelessness has settled down in the middle of the central business district, threatening to drive away business and the tourist dollar. As one *New York Times* headline blares, "A First Look at Homeless Is Raw Sight for Tourists":

> They march through Grand Central Terminal or the Port Authority bus station, headed for Macy's, the South Street Seaport, or a Broadway matinee. But first, they must pass the homeless men numbed by Thunderbird who snore under newsprint blankets and the ragged women who rant incoherently about Jesus, Ronald Reagan or their lost loves.[56]

In earlier times, a skid row could be tolerated even adjacent to a business district, because such districts were clearly defined and somewhat separated from important areas of business and commerce. But today business districts are expanding, and the sight of homelessness in these new business areas is undesirable, thus prompting policy-makers to make concealing and isolating the homeless, whether in shelters or not, a primary initiative.The 42nd Street redevelopment project in New York might, in this sense, be seen as the archetypal program for the homeless: tear down the entire neighborhood into which the homeless have settled and rebuild it with new and security-designed buildings, possibly user-friendly but certainly homeless-hostile.[57]

Solving Homelessness: A Serious Approach

A THOROUGH-GOING EXPLANATION of homelessness, finding its roots in the housing system, changes in employment patterns, and the spatial restructuring of cities, all abetted by governmental policies, has clear policy implications.[58] First and foremost, *homelessness must be seen as a component, an extreme reflection, of general social, economic, and political patterns, not as an isolated problem, separate and apart.*

The homeless deserve priority, particularly in access to housing programs. But limiting housing provision just to meeting their immediate needs is self-defeating. The characteristics of the housing system that produce homelessness will continue producing it. Nevertheless, special care for many of the homeless is also necessary. Some are mentally ill, as are parts of any popula-

tion. Some drink; others take drugs; others have become unused to conventional residential living, and need to be reintroduced to it. Other services may be needed, and they may be needed in unusual concentration because of the devastating conditions to which the homeless have had to adapt in the past. Decent housing for the homeless within a decent housing system must meet these needs, just as the special housing needs of women, the elderly, single-parent households, children, and other groups within the population must be met. If housing means homes for all, not just shelter, then the homeless need homes, just like the rest of us.

Government actions aggravating homelessness must be turned around. Homelessness caused by gentrification and abandonment involve changes that can readily be avoided by available land use control devices, perhaps with some imaginative modifications.[59] Provisions against displacement, anti-warehousing measures, controls on condominium and cooperative conversions, public reinvestment in abandoned neighborhoods, the use of tax abatement and exemption policies to promote integration rather than gentrification, an equitable distribution of public services and facilities, and anti-displacement zoning are all among the possibilities.

Building temporary shelters is no solution to a permanent, structural problem. The system must provide enough decent housing for low-income people, or the problem of homelessness will simply reproduce itself endlessly. To ask the private housing industry to provide such housing where it is not profitable to do so is going against the nature of the beast. Public control has to be exercised, over the distribution of housing and over economic development in general, so that jobs created and benefits received are shared more widely. The excluded have to be brought back within the mainstream of work and productivity.

Movement towards this broader view of homelessness is taking place. The National Coalition for the Homeless has drafted and obtained partial passage of a National Homeless Persons Survival Act that addresses a broad range of causes and consequences of homelessness. The New York Coalition for the Homeless is in the forefront of housing campaigns on issues such as

warehousing (holding apartments empty pending up-grading and conversion), rent control, new housing construction, housing subsidies, condominium conversion controls. A recent conference in Washington brought 400 low-income housing advocates together with such groups as the National Conference on Economic Alternatives, and together they saw homelessness as a crucial issue on each of their agendas. As this is being written, several proposals taking such a holistic view of the problem are being submitted to California Senator Alan Cranston for consideration in his promised sweeping new look at national housing legislation.[60]

The homeless themselves are continuing to organize, and their own demands reflect an awareness of the context in which they exist. In Chris Sprowal's words:

> If the government can send $100 million to some cutthroats in Central America then it can damn sure build some houses in this country. We need to let Reagan know that before he goes ahead and builds his Star Wars program he better provide some damn jobs for us![61]

Such comments indicate why homelessness is such a danger to the legitimacy of the status quo. Homelessness in the midst of plenty may shock people into the realization that homelessness exists not because the system is failing to work as it should, but because the system *is* working as it must.

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